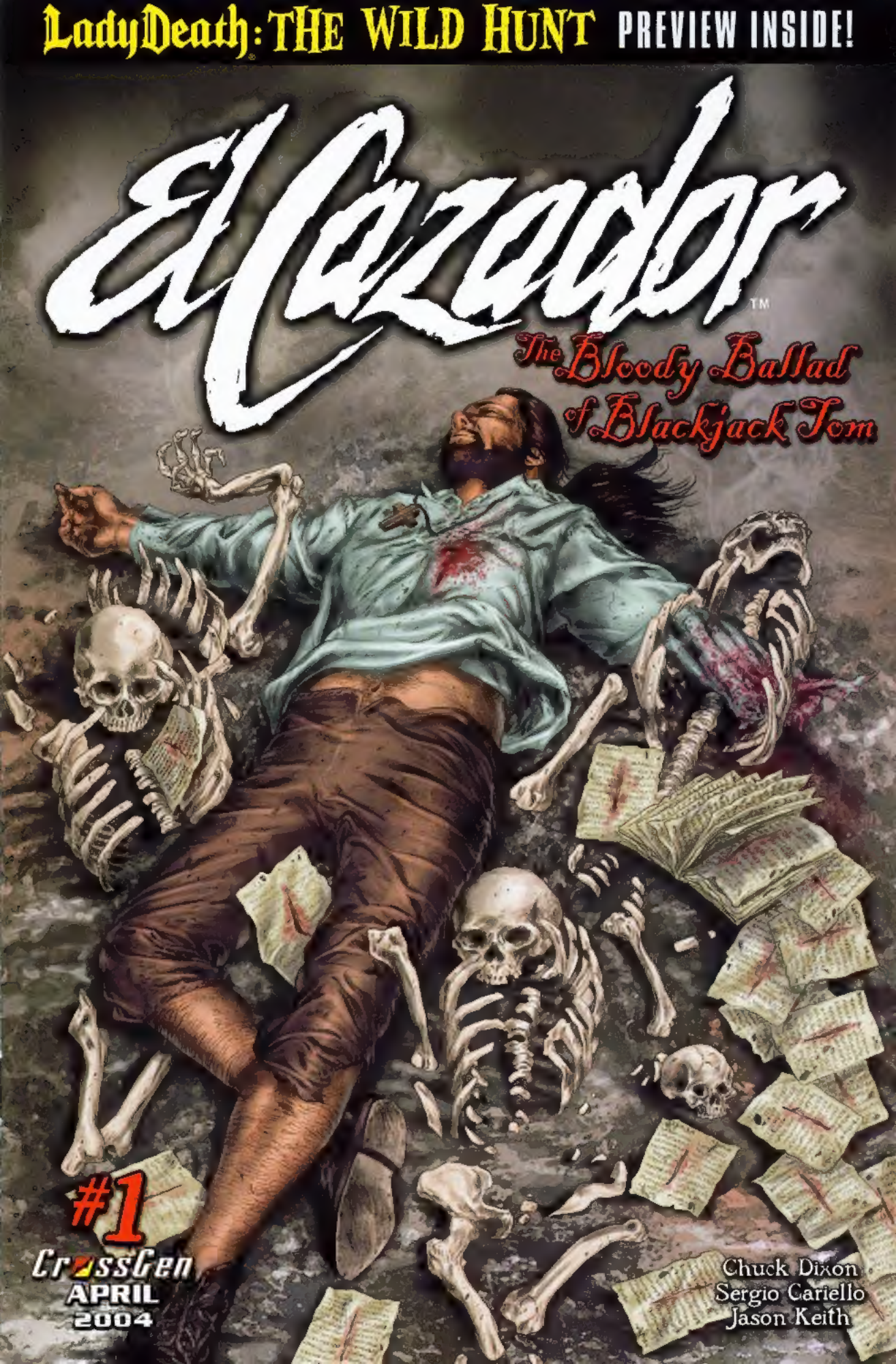
LadyDeath: THE WILD HUNT PREVIEW INSIDE!
El Cazador™
The Bloody Ballad of Blackjack Tom
#1
CrossGen
APRIL
2004
Chuck Dixon
Sergio Cariello
Jason Keith

IT IS THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 1687

Europe is in a rare moment of peace, though there is a sense that old rivals are simply gathering strength for renewed hostilities. King James II sits uneasy on the English throne. Louis XIV of France looks ravenously beyond his borders to Spain. Phillip V longs for the days when his Spanish Armada ruled the seas. Innocent XI is pope and schemes to return Europe to a fiefdom of the Holy See.

And while the Old World basks in a momentary respite, the lands beyond are a cauldron of violence and greed. For these are the final days of the Golden Age of Piracy, when no ship was safe whether it sail the waters of the East Indies or follow the currents to the Caribbean.

Villainous craft crewed by traitors, deserters, thieves, and worse roam virtually untroubled over the world's oceans bringing misery and death to all who plied their trade upon the seas or made their home along unprotected coasts.

They were cutthroats and devils who flew colors that warned of a terrible retribution toward any who dared oppose them. And often these colors hid their true mission, for many of these freebooters sailed secretly under the protection of the crowns of Europe.

Our tale is one of revenge, horror, and heroism. We have hewed as close to the truth of events as we are able. It is for the reader to discern fact from fiction, actuality from speculation.

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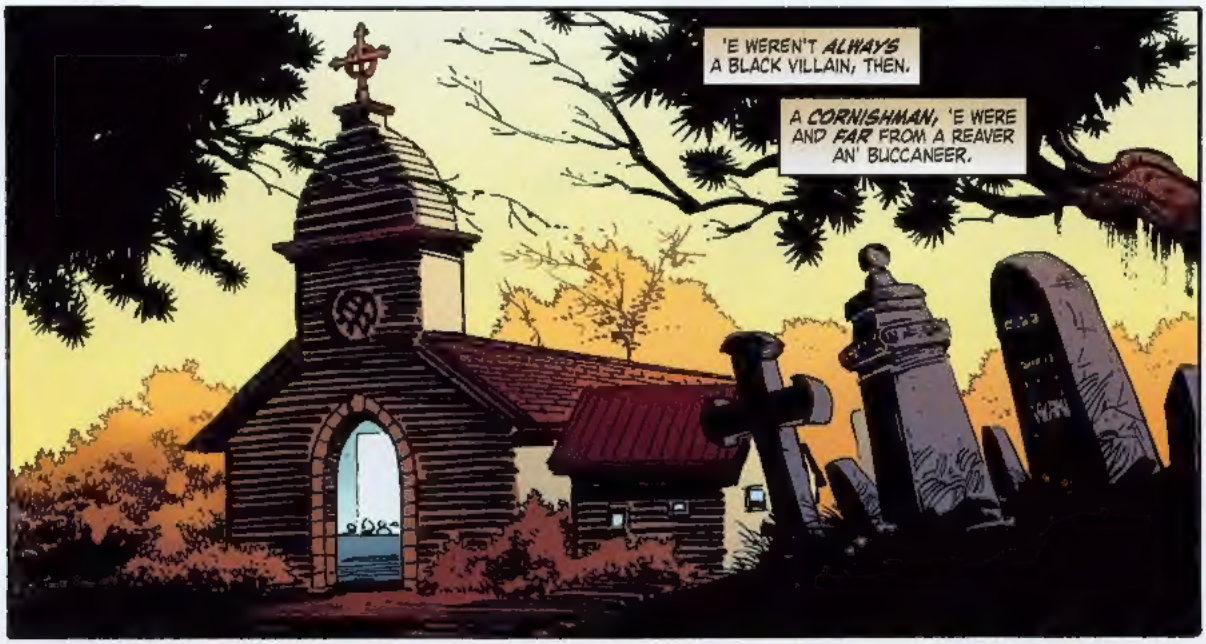
A PIRATE TALE, EH?
OI'VE A TALE FOR YE, IF YE'VE A MIND T'HARKEN.
OF A COVE WHO FELL TO THE DARKEST DEPTHS O'THE CARIBEE LIKE LUCIFER FROM HEAVEN. 'IS NAME IS--

—CAPTAIN BLACKJACK TOM HISSELF.
YE'VE HEARD OF OL' TOMMY, EH?
TERROR OF ANY SEAGOIN' CRAFT FROM THE YUCATAN T'THE SLAVE COAST.
A RIGHT SCOURGE AND A PERILOUS MAN TO KNOW.
BUT OI KNOWED 'IM, I DID.


'E WEREN'T *ALWAYS* A BLACK VILLAIN, THEN.
A *CORNISHMAN,* 'E WERE AND *FAR* FROM A REAVER AN' BUCCANEER.

A *CLERIC,* 'E WERE. A LOWLY CURATE IN A COUNTRY PARISH.
MARRIED A SIMPLE LASS; A *CROFTER'S* DAUGHTER.

AS OI MENTIONED *AFORE,* JUST ALIKE AN ANGEL IN GOD'S HEAVEN.
SO SAINTLY AND SINLESS ON'Y T'FALL SO *LOW.*

'E SHARED 'IS LOVE AND 'IS *AMBITIONS* WITH 'IS LOVELY NEW BRIDE, DID OUR TOM.
TO *SPREAD* THE WORD OF THE SAVIOR, MY DEAREST PET. *THAT* IS WHAT I AM BOUND TO DO.
AND THAT YOU *WILL,* THOMAS, TO BE SURE.

AND HOW IS THAT TO BE, PET? AS A WRETCHED CURATE IN THIS FORGOTTEN SHIRE? WITH THE REVEREND GILHALLEN AT THE PULPIT?
IT WILL BE DECADES AFORE I AM PASTOR OF THE VILLAGE.
WHAT THEN, THOMAS?
MISSION WORK, PET.
MISSION--?
TAKIN' THE WORD TO THE HEATHEN, THE GODLESS-- THOSE DAMNED TO THE ETERNAL FLAME BY THEIR IGNORANCE OF GOD.
WHITHER SHALL WE GO, THOMAS?
THE NEW WORLD IS THE PLACE. SAVAGES LIKE CHILDREN WHO KNOW NOT THE HOLY SCRIPTURE.
THERE I CAN TOIL HONESTLY IN SERVICE OF THE LORD.
WITH ME CLEAVED TO YOUR SIDE, DEAR HUSBAND.
WE SHALL TOIL TOGETHER.
AN' THUS THEY SAILED 'PON A WEST INDIES TRADER FOR THE ISLES OF THE CARIBEE--

--TO AN ISLE FULL OF PAGANS *CHOSEN* BY THE ARCHBISHOP HISSELF.

'ERE THEY'D MAKE THEIR 'OME. 'ERE OL' TOMMY'D BUILD A HOUSE OF *FAITH*.
WHAT'LL WE DO FOR A *CHURCH*, THOMAS?
I AM TOLD THERE'S AN OLD SPANISH MISSION, A *CHAPEL*.

SUCH A LONELY, *GODFORSAKEN* PLACE.
GOD HAS NOT FORSAKEN IT. IT IS THESE *SAVAGES* THAT HAVE *TURNED* THEIR BACK FROM THE LIGHT, PET.
BUT *WE* WILL MAKE IT ARIGHT; NO FEARS OF THAT.

THE RAFTERS WILL *RING* WITH SONGS!
A *SANCTUARY* FOR THE FALLEN, A *REFUGE* FOR THOSE WHO SEEK THE WORD!
AFTER A GOOD *SWEEPIN'*, I IMAGINE.
COPPERS, MISTAH?
YOU GIVE US *COIN*?
YOU TWO ARE *BESOTTED*!
AWAY! OUT OF MY CHURCH!
LOOK TO YOUR *SOULS*, THE PAIR OF YOU!
WHAT IS YOUR *NAME*?
T'KUBULI, MISTAH.
WHERE DOES ONE BUY *STRONG* DRINK, T'KUBULI?
SO'S YE'RE THE NEW BLACKJACK, EH? NEW REVEREND GONNA FILL THE CARIBO'S 'EARTS WITH JAYSUS?
'AVE A WELCOMIN' ROUND ON *ME*, REV.

ER?
I'LL NOT TOUCH YOUR DEMON BREW, SINNER!
AND YOU'LL NOT SELL ANOTHER DRAM TO THESE HEATHENS!
THE LORD HAS COME TO THIS ISLAND!
AND THE LORD HAS SPOKEN!
THESE PEOPLE ARE THE SAVIOR'S! D'YOU HEAR ME!
BEGONE! AND TAKE YOUR STRUMPET WITH YOU!
AND SPREAD WORD THAT THOMAS CARTWRIGHT WILL WELCOME NO SINNERS TO THESE SHORES!
STAND CLEAR OF THIS ISLE, ALL YE WHO WOULD CORRUPT MY FLOCK!
A MAN OF POWER, 'E WAS. A MAN T'BE RECKONED WITH, OUR TOMMY.

THE OL' MISSION WAS SET RIGHT.
AN' TOM WORKED ASIDE THOSE HE COULD COAX FROM THE VILLAGE ON T'OTHER SIDE OF THE ISLAND.
AN' THE YOUNG BOY T'KUBULI TOOK THE CHRISTIAN NAME O' MICHAEL.
AN' BECAME AS NEAR A SON T'TOM AS 'E COULD WISH.
THE CHURCH STOOD 'UMBLE BY THE FOREST AN' THE WORD OF GOD BEGAN SPREADIN'.
AN' THE FIRST WHELP O' TH' CARTWRIGHT'S UNION WAS BORN AND 'ER NAME WAS ANNABELLE.
ALL WAS GOOD AND ALL WAS HOLY AS HELL IN THAT PLACE.

AN THE LITTLE CHURCH GREW AN GREW AN THE FLOCK MULTIPLIED.
AS TH' SEASONS PASSED, THE REVEREND AN MISSUS CARTWRIGHT THEMSELVES ADDED T'THE CONGREGATION.

BUT 'APPINESS CAN BE SPENT ALIKE ANYTHIN' ELSE, EH?
AN' THE COFFERS RUN DRY ONE SUMMER NIGHT --
YES, MY CHILDREN?
MISTAH CARTWRIGHT, SIR. ME AN ANNABELLE ARE WANTIN TO ASK YOU--
MICHAEL AND I WISH TO MARRY, FATHER.
YOU--YOU CANNOT!! THIS IS--IS--AN ABOMINATION!
RELEASE YOUR STINKING HANDS FROM MY DAUGHTER!
YOU IMPERTINENT SWINE! YOU FILTHY ANIMAL!
I'LL NOT MARRY MY DARLING TO A CARAIBO!
NO STRONGER TEMPER EXISTS THAN LOVE TURNED TO LOATHIN'.
OL' TOM STOKED THE FIRES OF WRATH IN THAT YOUNG SAVAGE.

TOM HELD OUT THE OPE O SALVATION IN ONE HAND.

AN' SMITED THAT OPE WITH T OTHER HAND.

LAD HAD NAY CHOICE BUT T'HIE BACK T'HIS OWN KIND.

AN THUS BEGAN THE FALL FROM GRACE AYE.

THE GATES O'THE INFERNO YAWNED WIDE

AN' SPARKS FLEW UPWARD.

MY LORD-
STOP THIS MADNESS, I SAY!
YOU MUST STOP, I PLEAD
MICHAEL--

TH' MORNIN' SUN FOUND A SCENE O' DESOLATION
ALL 'E WORKED FOR, ASHES. 'IS FAMILY NOT 'EARD FROM.
BLEEDIN' FROM 'IS GRIEVOUS WOUNDS
E KNOWED HIS LIFE'S BLOOD WAS DEPARTIN'.
E KNOWED THE FLOW AD T BE STAUNCHED.
THE LAST OF 'IS STRENGTH IT TOOK T CRAWL T'THE DYIN EMBERS O' 'IS BELOVED 'OME
THE LAST O' IS RESOLVE T'SCALD HIS WOUND CLOSED.

AN' THAT FIRE BURNED SUMMAT ELSE FROM OL' THOMAS CARTWRIGHT.
'IS GOOD SOUL. 'IS LOVE O THE ALMOIGHTY.
'IS LAST SACRED ACT WAS THE PLACIN O'CROSSES ON TH' GRAVES.
DONE O'NY FOR TH' SOULS O' 'IS BRIDE AN' BAIRNS, FOR 'E TURNED 'IS BACK ON GOD THAT DAY.
SIX GRAVES E DUG. WOULD BE SEVEN, BUT FOR ANNABELLE.
OF HER, E COULD FIND NO SIGN.
AN THAT THE WORST OF ALL, AYE.
THE NOT KNOWIN' TH' FATE O'DARLING ANNABELLE.
AN' SO 'E SWORE AN' SO 'E RAGED.
ALL 'IS PAIN AN' ALL 'IS FEAR, 'E SHOUTED T'HEAVEN.
AN' THE WORST AN' BLOODIEST OATHS WAS FOR THE GOD 'E THOUGHT BETRAYED 'IS TRUST.

AN' WITH 'IS SOUL AN FAITH, THE *WILL* O'THE MAN FLED. A *TATTERS* WAS 'E.
AN JUST LIKE TH' SAVIOR E DENIED, ON TH' THIRD DAY CAME *RESURRECTION* IN TH' FORM O ROVERS

OO'S 'E, THEN?
A BLOODY BLACKJACK, ELIJAH--
AIN'T YE NEVER STEPPED INSIDE A CHURCH LAD?
'ERE THEN WHAT'S BROUGHT YE T THIS SORRY PLACE, REVEREND? AN' OF MORE NTEREST--
--WHAT YE HOLDIN' N THE WAY OF VALUABLES?
EH?
STRIKE ME

WHAT SHIP IS THAT?
THE FALMOUTH PRIZE, LATE O PORT ROYAL
TAKEN BY US, SHE WAS.
YOU'LL BRING ME TO YOUR CAPTAIN--
--OR SUFFER THE RESULTS OF THIS REMAINING CHARGE.
TH' CAP'N LIES THERE, SIR.
YE MURDERED 'M. YE DID
HAHA HAHA HA
HAHAHA HA HA
EACH MORE CRAVEN THAN THE NEXT TH' REAVERS BORE HIM T'THEIR VESSEL.
THEY SENSED A VIOLENCE IN 'M EVEN GREATER THAN TH' THREAT O'THAT MUSKETOON.

IN 'IS EYES THEY SPIED A GLIMPSE OF THEIR *OWN* DAMNATION.
AN' THEY PUT T'SEA WITHOUT *QUESTION*.
AN' 'E *TOLD* 'EM 'IS TALE O'SACRIFICE AN' ILL FORTUNE.
TOLD 'EM 'E'D SIGNED A PACT WITH *SATAN* HISSELF.
AN' NOT A MAN JACK *DOUBTED* 'IS WORD.
'E BID THEM *HOVE* FOR THE FAR SIDE O'THAT ISLE.
'E'D VISIT THE *DEVIL'S* OWN FLAMES ON THEM CAIRIBES.
BY TH' BITTER END O'THAT DARK DAY, THEY SIGHTED *FIRES* FROM TH'VILLAGE.
AN' EACH ONE FOLLOWED 'IS COMMANDS AS THOUGH OL' TOM HAD A *GRIP* ON THEIR IMMORTAL SOULS.

TOM SHORE AS THEY NEARED TH' SOURCE O' THE SMOKE--
--SWORE OATHS THAT MADE EVEN THE BLACKEST HEART AMONG THEM SHRINK IN HORROR.
WHAT AWAITED THEM WERE A PUNISHMENT BEYOND TH' DARK DESIRES O'THOMAS CARTWRIGHT.
THE POX.
IT'D TAKEN EVER' LIFE IN THAT VILLAGE.
GOD ABOVE WAS MOCKIN' 'IM ONCE MORE.
TOOK EVEN 'IS VENGEANCE FROM 'IM.

AN' MORE BESIDES.
HEAVENLY FATHER OR PRINCE O'LIES. ONE OR T'OTHER WERE HAVIN' A JEST AT OL'TOM'S SAKE.
ANNABELLE.
O' ALL TH' BRUTAL FATES 'E IMAGINED 'IS DAUGHTER SUFFERED--
-- FINDIN' HER LOVE FOR TH' YOUNG CAIRIBE T'BE TRUE PAINED WORST O'ALL.
AN' TH' LAST O' TH' MAN KNOWN IN CORNWALL AS THOMAS CARTWRIGHT WAS SEARED AWAY.

AN' FROM THAT DAY FORTH, ME BUCKOS, BLACKJACK TOM SET 'IS COURSE IN LIFE.
'E SWORE *T'SERVE* NO GOD, *SURRENDER* T'NO MAN AN' PAY THE DEVIL HIS DUE.
AN' *THA'S* A TALE WORTH A TANKARD OF THE BEST, *O!* RECKON.